Kunapipi

Volume 16 | Issue 1 Article 77

1994

Caprice and No Fixed Address: Playing with Gender and Genre.

Isabel Carrera

Caprice and No Fixed Address: Playing with Gender and Genre.

Abstract

Contemporary Canadian writing is rich in texts that break the boundaries of genre and gender. The postmodern character of many of these texts often accounts for the former, while the latter is almost inevitably linked to feminist awareness. Women's writing has explored the possibilities of trespassing, of crossing literary borders and of subverting conventions in many areas, but the insistence of feminist discourse has also produced its effects in male writing. This is exemplified by many of Robert Kroetsch's texts, for instance, which are relevant here as an intertext with the two novels we are about to discuss: Aritha van Herk's No Fixed Address (1986) and George Bowering's Caprice (1987).1 These are only two of the travelling women who inhabit recent Canadian narrative, mapping out the country while exploring the limits of a particular fictional genre.

ISABEL CARRERA

Caprice and *No Fixed Address*: Playing with Gender and Genre.

Contemporary Canadian writing is rich in texts that break the boundaries of genre and gender. The postmodern character of many of these texts often accounts for the former, while the latter is almost inevitably linked to feminist awareness. Women's writing has explored the possibilities of trespassing, of crossing literary borders and of subverting conventions in many areas, but the insistence of feminist discourse has also produced its effects in male writing. This is exemplified by many of Robert Kroetsch's texts, for instance, which are relevant here as an intertext with the two novels we are about to discuss: Aritha van Herk's *No Fixed Address* (1986) and George Bowering's *Caprice* (1987).[1] These are only two of the travelling women who inhabit recent Canadian narrative, mapping out the country while exploring the limits of a particular fictional genre.

Caprice and *No Fixed Address* are novels in which a male-centred narrative genre is transformed and deconstructed by the presence of a female protagonist. Not surprisingly, as they are usurping a man's role, both protagonists are women of action. Caprice rides around the British Columbia interior and across the border seeking to revenge her dead brother, shot by (American) Frank Spencer. Arachne goes through successive episodes and jobs in her native Vancouver until we meet her as a sales rep, making good business out of selling women's underwear to stores all over Alberta, and keeping herself amused with the road-jockeys she encounters on her way. While the first enacts a tale of the western, the second is so clearly a picaresque hero that one (or certainly a Spanish 'one') wonders how some of van Herk's early reviewers managed to overlook the fact.

The similarities between the two texts immediately invite comparison. Both are dominated by the presence of the main, female, character, whose gender is enhanced by her subversive or incongruous incursion in male territory. The women's physique is correspondingly impressive and unconventional. Neither treads lightly on the ground: they beat it with their feet, they thump, and heads are turned. Their eyes are of unusual colours, green in one case, grey in the other. Arachne's gaze can pin one down, her body language is a challenge. Caprice has bright red hair and freckles, and her tallness is an imposing feature. The emblematic means

of transport adds to their uniqueness: Caprice's Spanish-born black steed, *Cabayo*, and Arachne's black vintage Mercedes attract quite as much attention as their owners; it is, of course, their combination with a female that makes animal and vehicle so extraordinary. The uniqueness of the women is finally represented in their names, Caprice and Arachne Manteia.

The movement of these two women, criss-crossing the west of Canada, falls within the collective task of mapping and inscribing the area in literature, a task to which other Prairie and West-Coast authors have contributed in the past. Van Herk and Bowering's texts show signs of the common geographic and cultural ground inhabited by the authors. Theirs is a literary space whose roads often intersect – hence the intersection of their narratives, which share a parodic, self-conscious, intertextual approach which thoroughly enjoys the game of literature and assumes a reader who participates of the enjoyment. The narrator moves between the omniscience of the third person and the direct involvement of the reader/narratee in the second person. Both novels are writer-reader texts, making full use of the participants in the communicative chain, with concessions to the reader balanced out by the authors' own visitation of the text, Bowering including his own poems and his persona, G. Delsing; van Herk in her self-portrait as the woman artist towards the end of the novel, and possibly in the italicized section, ambiguously the reader/author's voice.

However, the emphasis on the combination of gender and genre remains the closest link between the novels. And yet it is precisely the tension between these two elements that separates them and makes the protagonists of the narratives (and the narratives themselves) more radically different than would appear at first sight. If Caprice and Arachne are to be true to the genre that each inhabits, their discourse (their selves) must differ; but perhaps more important is the fact that the gender of the author (implied or 'real'), and the gender of the *story-maker* embedded in their stories, have already conditioned the separation.

George Bowering's *Caprice* is a remodelling of the western, a genre which is not only male-centred in subject-matter but also the cliché of popular male reading. Its female counterpart is popular romance. The picaresque, in its traditional formula, contains examples of females, but their discourses are usually filtered through the moralizing voice of a male narrator or the exemplary outcome of their adventures, which are in any case limited by their gender. It is only in the 20th century that a few *pícaras* begin to speak freely. But even today, the genre in its modified form is strongly associated with mobile men, as shown in the fact that *No Fixed Address* was immediately compared to Kerouac's *On the Road* and, nearer home, Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man*.

A panoramic study of the evolution of the picaresque[2] shows that the genre has slowly moved away from history towards romance. *No Fixed*

Address is subtitled *An Amorous Journey*, and the character Caprice is defined in her own story as 'romance': 'It may be simply your room, as far as you're concerned, Miss Caprice,' says the journalist of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 'but for the literate people of the empire it will be legend. It will be history. Most important, perhaps, it will be romance' (p. 171). While neither Bowering nor van Herk may have had in mind popular romance in writing their novels, it is interesting to note a second genre embedded in them both: a quest which touches on the various definitions of romance, as if the attempt to make the western or the picaresque female-centred, attracted such a subgenre.

The gendered author and reader expected of the western and of romance would appear to be reflected in the authors and reviewers of these two novels, as shown in their treatment of the main characters. Two Canadian critics, writers themselves, seem to confirm expectations at the reception end, and to sense them in the production: 'I love her [...]' writes Stan Dragland of Caprice, 'and I think Bowering loves her too.' Constance Rooke, on her part, says of Arachne 'I loved her, and I loved the writer's fondness for her.'[3] The writers' presence is hard to resist in these novels. Van Herk has spoken about her creation of strong female characters: 'I like tough women, who can act. I'm also interested in the woman as a trickster figure. [...] I'm interested in showing female characters that are images of what women can do, the possibilities of the world. And I don't apologise for them not being realistic.'[4] The statement underlines the suitability of the picaresque to her purpose and her preference.

George Bowering, for his part, has explained the birth of the idea of *Caprice*: 'I noticed two things about the western: one, that they were all very male-centred, and, two, that it always has something to do with dry land. [...] And so I said O.K., I want to make a western which is female-centred. I would just turn everything around – that way it is not just a parody, but an investigation of a western, putting it on trial, almost.'[5] Thus his purpose relates firstly to genre, then to gender, although a woman is essential (or perhaps instrumental) in the process. His own fondness for his creation is perfectly credible, as we shall see, in terms of fantasy.

Arachne and Caprice have been described by their reviewers as female and male fantasies respectively, and their paperback (Canadian) editions include commentary to this effect. One of the early male reviewers of *No Fixed Address* declared, incensed at this 'feminist diatribe', that Arachne no doubt fulfilled some women's fantasies like Mike Hammer fulfilled some men's.[6] The back cover of the Penguin edition of *Caprice* quotes *The Winnipeg Free Press*: 'Caprice herself seems to have galloped out of Mr Bowering's sexual fantasies.' Allowing for some truth in the appreciation of the characters as author-reader's fantasies, the above description would make of Arachne the *subject* of a fantasy, with whom the female author-reader may identify; the remark about Caprice, in contrast, makes

her the object of the fantasy of the author, thus pointing towards a crucial factor of differentiation between Caprice and Arachne.

Caprice's physical appearance is certainly suggestive of depictions of women in certain types of male fantasy literature. Larger than life, provided with loud boot heels and soft leather gloves, she sports a large whip and, as we are repeatedly told by various onlookers, her breasts *do not bounce*. Furthermore, her perfect thighs are 'not ruined by that lateral bulge of flesh that sometimes makes women's trousers look like breeches' (p. 119). A contemporary model of beauty indeed, riding on a horse and equipped, as said, with a whip. Bowering explains that he chose the whip as the singular weapon required by the genre because he 'did not want her to be a gunperson'.[7] One can see that such a symbolic inversion would be rather disturbing. This figure, out of yet another subgenre, male popular romance/comic magazine/pornography, is mostly silent, though she has the added attraction of a slight foreign accent (she comes from Quebec), and the must of contemporary intellectual fantasy; she is a beauty endowed with brains: a poet, a creator of wor(l)ds. This latter part of the fantasy is fittingly reserved for the narrator-author and reader, as she keeps it secret from the uncouth westerners she encounters.

Arachne's physique is equally striking, but in very different terms. It is mainly her face and its expression that is described, 'her dark hair and wide-set green eyes, wide cheeks, this strange pronouncement to her bones, a wide mouth, broad shoulders even'; a face that shows 'Rebellion. Dissention. Trouble' (p. 98). Her features are strong and solid. They reflect personality far more than sexuality, however explicit the text may be about the latter. Her body is, above all, solid; her expression rebellious. When Arachne looks back to her real self, she sees her in sneakers and jeans, and the dress that brings out her stunning beauty is a silk trouser suit which matches the colour of her eyes. For her eyes remain her characteristic feature. Eyes of 'needling insolence', eyes that defy those they encounter in a woman who *looks*, and annuls the male gaze.

The connection between Arachne and women's fantasies is undoubtedly a true one, though a far less simplistic one than the male reviewer seemed to have in mind. Nancy K. Miller[8] has challenged the Freudian assumption that female fantasies are reduced to the erotic while young men's include egoistic or ambitious wishes. Miller claimed that women writers' texts contain egoistic desires along with erotic ones, and that the repressed content which gives birth to the fantasy is 'not the erotic impulses, but an impulse to power: a fantasy of power that would revise the social grammar in which women are never defined as subjects' (p. 41). Later in the same essay she asserts that 'the plots of women's literature are not about "life" in any therapeutic sense, nor should they be. They are about the plots of literature itself, about the constraints [placed] on rendering a female life in fiction' (p. 46). It is the combination of these two things that makes of *No Fixed Address* a 'portrait of contemporary fantasies', as its

back cover states. For Arachne fulfils the double fantasy of erotics and power, while escaping literary constraints. Arachne encompasses wishes well beyond sexual behaviour: wishes related to autonomy and to subjectivity.

Like popular romance fiction, *No Fixed Address* inverts the usual pattern in that it poses woman as subject, man as object.[9] As Alison Light has maintained,[10] the reasons for the attraction that women feel for popular romance go much deeper than has generally been acknowledged, even by feminist criticism. Starting from the psychoanalytical consideration of fictions as fantasies, she states that romance offers women, first, a dream of equality in heterosexual relationships, and second, an access to a subjectivity which operates within the field of pleasure. Once again, these are unmistakable characteristics of *No Fixed Address*. Arachne is very much the *subject* of her text. She is persistently the grammatical subject of the sentences, and it is her consciousness that is conveyed, directly and often painstakingly, through the third-person narrator; it is through her eyes, her mind, and her body that we perceive her sexual encounters, her attitudes and her desires. Although we occasionally are tuned in to the mind of other characters, notably that of her stable love, Thomas, Arachne remains the main focalizer of her story. Her sexuality is described from her own perceptions, as is Thomas's gentleness, the perfect touch of his hands, his knowledge of her body, his acceptance of herself as she is.

If Thomas appears 'too good to be true' as has been said, it is as well to remember that no realistic characters are intended in the novel, that we are moving in a genre of exaggeration (the picaresque) and of fantasy. Thomas is the female fantasy of a lover who 'knows what she wants before she wants it', and whose gentleness and understanding have long been a female sexual fantasy trying to assert itself against the male belief in the magic attribute of potency. Thomas also accepts Arachne's unrestricted freedom, an *ungendered* fantasy, here established as such. The wish-fulfilment in *No Fixed Address* is closely related to these elements, too often overlooked in discussions of the novel, and perhaps obscured by the more striking dimension of Arachne's *unrepentant* promiscuity, another literary barrier parodically broken by this picaresque female character ('You don't have to love them. You just come fast. Make sure you beat them end don't count on having time for more than one' [p. 34]).

The comparison with *Caprice* in the aspects of subjectivity, autonomy and female fantasy is revealing of gender and genre conditioning. Their very names, both exceptional, point towards differences in the conception of the two women, and of their function in the text. The mythical references of Arachne are clear, but whose caprice is Caprice? Her own? The narrator's? The author's? Caprice's beauty may fit some women's own subjective fantasies, and many would enjoy the idea of wiping molesters off the ground, with a whip or by any other means; travelling and writing are also desires of many women. But signs of Caprice's pleasure in her

story are strangely absent, and her own consciousness is only vaguely conveyed. Presented as highly erotic to observers, there is only passing indication of her own desires or behaviour, except for brief reports of apparently satisfactory and faithful passion for her schoolteacher, baseball-player boyfriend, Roy Smith; a caring friend, but one who tries to coax her into marriage and into adopting his name (a rather insoluble inversion), who tries to make her forget her quest and settle down in his company. She is a puzzle to him as Arachne never is to Thomas, for Roy is acting here within the boundaries of genre, the faithful schoolteacher who hopes for the hero's reform.

The question of Caprice as subject/object is linked to the narrative process of the novel as a whole, and its insistence on *seeing*. Our focalizers vary, and we alternatively see (and are told we see) Caprice through 'ordinary English eyes', through American eyes, Indian eyes, male and female eyes, but we rarely see through her own. The reader is persistently put into the position of voyeur, watching Caprice, voyeurism in *mise-en-abyme*, as s/he, by reading, watches the watchers, interprets the interpreters, moves telescopically away from the two Indians on the hill watching/interpreting the stories that develop in the valley, to a close-up of Caprice's story. On one level, the desire to actually *see* her is strongly created; 'Lord, she was beautiful. You should have seen her' (p. 117). It is no wonder that Douglas Barbour states in his early review that he 'can't wait to see the paperback'. On another level, it arouses the desire to read her, to see through those eyes with which she surveys the terrain, but through which we very seldom are allowed to look. Her eyes, unlike Arachne's, do not challenge the male gaze.

But the ultimate difference between Caprice and Arachne is, as it should be, of a strictly narrative kind: it lies in their story-maker, their creator within the text. For while Arachne spins her own journey/tale, Caprice's story is being written for her in advance. Caprice has been tempted into the tale by Frank Spencer, murderer of her brother, conductor of her story of vengeance. Her limits are textual, of genre. Her repeated dialogue with Roy Smith is revealing: 'Will you give up this terrible adventure and come home with me. No. Why not. You know, you have read the things I have read. Those are just things to read. Then why did they get written. Why can't you just write it then. I am writing it, that is what I am doing' (p. 76). But her writing is preordained, she is dutifully writing an inescapable story; her fate. As the crucial moment of the showdown approaches, Caprice wonders where she is being led by Spencer and why she is going on: 'Why was she following this trail with no known destination? She recognized the feeling. She was writing because she was looking forward to the last stanza' (p. 226). Caprice, the poet, is acting out/writing a temporary tale of vengeance in the West, a tale pre-written for her by an American man. She is inhabiting a genre in which she is an outsider, in which language must be transformed to adjust to her ('I've got to do what

I ... a woman ... a sister,'[p. 175]), cast in a role which she performs reluctantly, looking forward to its end, to her return to Quebec and to writing poetry. Her adventure of the West reads like a parenthesis in a life meant otherwise. Her narrative is a displacement and once her vengeance is consummated, Caprice as we know her is dead.

By contrast, Arachne's genre is her essence from beginning to end, it is one with her trickster figure and her autonomy, relying as it does on episodic, open-ended structures and free-moving, amoral protagonists. Reaching a destination would defeat her object. She is 'infatuated with motion' (p. 68), has no wish to reach the last stanza. She is presented (as traditional pícaros are) as the creator of her own story, erasing when convenient, refusing to be tied down by anything or anyone, including author or reader, who must finally give up their search and abandon their 'Notebook on a missing person'. Her journey, her quest, has no end. She acts out all the phases of the necessary but impossible search for identity, all within the genre: she moves from a negative perception of self to a stable, successful social self, then to a deeper recognition in Josef and the Wild Woman, and from there unto the unknown, unexplored dimensions of personality, of life and death. There is no end to her road. She is not murdered, as Caprice was, by the ending of her story.

Thus the choice of genre conditions the stories, but so does the degree of centrality given to gender. The tighter plot of the western (hardly altered by the gender inversion) imposes the path on Caprice; or, alternatively, the predominance of genre over gender does so. The extent to which the western is put to trial is undermined by the fact that Caprice's presence causes such a commotion. Otherwise, the difficulties are more of language than of plot (Is she a cowgirl, a cowperson, a bullgirl?). Much of the humour and literary play of the book are born from the transformations of the western that are not gender-dependent, and from the comment on the literary creation of 'The West'. The title *Caprice* thus goes beyond reference to the protagonist.

The genre of the picaresque, for its part, having traditionally explored, in the first person, the life-story of its protagonist, leads easily into female subjectivity, and its openness and amorality permits an unorthodox view of femaleness without the constant reminder of intrusion. In this particular version, there is a possible female chain of subjectivity, moving from author to text/protagonist/storymaker and to the reader. In *Caprice* the connection as subjects is only possible between author and reader if the reader is male and Caprice is their common object of fantasy.

Despite the important differences in subject-position between these novels, it is hardly a coincidence that different genres and gendered authors have allowed the protagonists freedom from similar literary constraints. Both Arachne and Caprice are allowed to be *bad* (even though Caprice's only childhood wish was to be good, yet another sign of her reluctant participation in her story); they are free from the usual

punishment inflicted on transgressors, and are equally free from the happy ending of marriage, despite serious temptations. In the western, genre dictates that marriage will not take place; traditional picaresque might dictate the opposite, but today's female narrative has long been writing beyond that ending. In her last reversal of convention, Caprice rides east into the sunrise, leaving the schoolteacher behind: true to dictates of genre, subversive in the norms of gender. Behind the novel itself is left a deconstruction of the myths of the West, and a (brief) incursion of femaleness into male language. Arachne disappears into the cosmos, leaving questions poised about her future – or her present - leaving behind a transgression of gender norms, a full appropriation of a genre, which can no longer be its male-centred self. For it has merged with the female subjectivity of romance to create a hybrid that combines subjectivity and autonomy, the best of both wor(l)ds.

Notes

1. George Bowering, *Caprice* (Markham: Penguin, 1988); Aritha van Herk, *No Fixed Address* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1987). All subsequent references are to these two editions.
2. See Introduction in G. Pellón & L.J. Rodríguez, eds., *Upstarts, Wanderers or Swindlers. Anatomy of the Pícaro*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986).
3. Stan Dragland, 'Wise and Musical Instruction: George Bowering's *Caprice*', *West Coast Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, Spring 1988, p. 86; Constance Rooke, note in *The Malahat Review*, Sept. 1986.
4. Interview by Gyrid Jerve, in *Kunapipi*, vol. VIII, no. 3, 1986, p. 68.
5. Peter Quartermaine and Laurie Ricou, 'Extra Basis: An Interview with George Bowering,' *West Coast Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, Spring 1988, p. 62.
6. For an account of early reviews on *No Fixed Address*, see Stephen Scobie, 'Aritha van Herk On the Road: Arachne's progress,' *Brick*, no. 29, Winter 1987, pp. 37-40.
7. Quartermaine & Ricou, p. 62.
8. 'Emphasis added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction', *PMLA*, vol. 96, no. 1, Jan. 1981, pp. 36-48 (page references in text).
9. For a discussion of this inversion, see Ann Barr Snitow 'Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different,' *Radical History Review*, no. 20, spring/summer 1979.
10. '"Returning to Manderley" – Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class', *Feminist Review*, 16, 1984.